

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Gardens Without Water

Isaiah 1

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I had a dream the other night that we were under a winter storm warning. A front was moving in that afternoon and everyone was getting ready to hunker down. Evening activities were canceled; everyone was consulting their weather apps. And then . . . it came. The skies were white-out, and snow was blowing in. First, the grass and then the roads were covered in it. When it was over, it was glorious, to see the whole earth covered in a blanket of snow.

I don't know if I'm much of a dream interpreter, but in this case, I think this dream visited me in my sleep for 2 reasons. First of all, you're welcome. We've been praying for rain, but maybe we should go all the way crazy and pray for a snowstorm! Who knows but maybe this was a sign. We don't even need snow; just a drop in temps a few degrees would feel like a respite at this point in this summer. So, the first reason maybe is just grace, the grace to me of living in a world for 7 seconds in REM sleep when it wasn't so hot. And the grace to you of remembering that someday it won't be 105. That day will come.

Second, I dreamed that dream because I've been sitting with our reading from Isaiah 1. I think it got inside. *Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.* I'm convinced that dwelling in that metaphor of grace is where my dream came from. It's also grace, like capital G Grace—that our sins are scarlet red, and even those are made white like snow. White, pure and whole, covers up the parched, broken earth.

I was asked to memorize this verse years ago along with a stack of notecards of other verses in the Bible that spoke of sin, forgiveness, grace, and redemption. It turns out there are a lot of verses in the Bible about the depths of our sin and need for forgiveness, God's saving grace, and the redemption that is given to us in Jesus Christ. One of my favorites was always from Romans 3: *For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*

Isaiah 1.18 was another favorite. *Though your sins are like scarlet they shall be as white as snow.* The thing is, Isaiah 1.18, like the others, was written on a notecard, just by itself, taken out of its context in the chapter. That didn't bother me. I didn't think about it. But there is actually a context for this image of scarlet sin, of sins red like crimson. And wow, the rest of that chapter and the rest of Isaiah has so much to do with the Gospel of Jesus. It turns out the hope of grace here in Isaiah was to a people who were so rotten that this is not just a lovely snowy metaphor assurance of God's enduring grace for the faithful followers of God; it was like one last attempt to tell the people it is still not too late to change their ways. And that God still would do anything to put the world to rights. This is what Isaiah is all about.

For 66 chapters, Isaiah called Israel to be the people God created and called them to be. Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis writes on the importance of Isaiah. "If you are going to read the New Testament," she says, "the gospel writers, the epistle writers, if you are going to understand what Jesus is talking about, you need to know Isaiah."

Isaiah, as modern scholarship has aptly demonstrated, is more of a movement than a single individual. The 66 chapters of this longest of all the prophets are divided into three eras: chapters 1-39, 40-55, 56-66. Most readings in church Sunday services come from the last two sections, the later writings. At Advent and Christmas "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem that her warfare is ended." We could play a fun game where you tell me what chapters these are from, but I'll let you off the hook. That's Isaiah 40.

Epiphany "Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you" (Isaiah 60); on Good Friday, "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." (Isaiah 53.5); and Easter, "Behold, I create a new heaven and a new earth and the former things shall not be remembered" (Is 65.17). These are the songs of the suffering servant, prophecies of the coming Messiah, hope against hope for goodness to return. Naturally, Christians read those and saw Jesus all over those pages. But when we read these passages through the year, we do what I did with that notecard from Isaiah 1—lift our favorite verses out of the context, and drop them in the worship guide.

Today's reading (and next week's too) is one of the rare instances of a reading from any of the 1st 39 chapters. Very rarely do we hear from the first 39. Perhaps because these are mostly passages of judgment. Can we bear to hear them as much as our ears itch to hear passages of grace?

In the opening words of Isaiah, God calls heaven and earth to listen. Can you believe this, God complains, I raised these people like children, like my own children, but they've rebelled against me. Even the dumb ox knows its owner, the silly donkey knows its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. You do not understand who God is, and you do not appear to understand what kind of life you're supposed to be living.

It appears that the people tell God how much they love him on Sunday and then let the rich get richer while the poor can barely get by the rest of the week. This is a major concern for the Lord. When God unites himself to the people, the strongest sinews of connection are with the weakest, the exploited, and the vulnerable. If a community is to worship God in any way that's not just tragically ironic, they must attend to those who are near the heart of God. If not, in God's eyes, they are a withering garden, drying up, branches dying on the once-verdant vine. God's judgment is sharp.

The big issue then as it is now is that God's people do all the church things right but not the neighbor things. And because of this, you're sick, God says, your whole head is sick, your whole heart is faint. No part of your body is sound but bruises and sores and open raw wounds are all over.

You're supposed to be a bright light, a city shining on a hill, but you're nothing more than a lonely shed in a vineyard, as defenseless as a shack in a cucumber field.

These images pile up in Isaiah 1: a body that's sick from head to toe. The glory of Jerusalem was nothing more than a poor shanty guarded only by cucumbers. Sodom and Gomorrah. If God wasn't gracious to you, you'd be those ancient destroyed cities, and you are them. Listen you rulers of Sodom, you people of Gomorrah.

The images pile up as Isaiah opens. Later in the chapter, the people are silver that's become dross, wine mixed with water, princes who've become rebels, and companions of thieves. And finally, a garden without water.

It's the last image—a garden without water—that really hits home right now. I know what that looks like and what it feels like. We all do, I think. It's been so long since we've had any rain. The rivers and stock tanks are running dry. The gardens and fields are long past parched. We pray for rain. My little garden at home- I gave up on it a month ago. Our little garden beds here on the church grounds, we let those go, too. A garden without water is a sad sight. It's so pitiful because it's not just what you're seeing when you look at it, the drooping stems, the withered leaves, the cracked soil. That's bad enough, but you see the sadness of what's there on top of the memory of what was there when it was first starting and it was alive. And all of that is laid on top of the idea of what should've been—the bounty, the verdancy, the loveliness, the tastiness--life. And now, just a withered-up, pitiful-looking thing. That's what my garden looks like, and I can hardly bear to look at it. The only hope now is waiting to chop down what's left and start over.

The image of a garden without water hits home because I know what that looks like to have a garden without any water. I also know what it feels like. I suspect you may as well, to feel like you are an unwatered garden, spiritually parched, sun-scorched, to feel like you have no spiritual vibrancy in you, and you're just a dried-up withered vine. Do you know that feeling? I think in life most people go through seasons like this. Often, they use the metaphor of a dark night, but the withered garden image gets at it for me.

God grieves to see his people like this, like a garden that should've been full of life but is all dead. But here's the thing in Isaiah: The people didn't think they were a dead garden. They thought they were a vibrant garden producing all kinds of beautiful fruit. They didn't feel dead; they felt alive. But in God's eyes, despite how they felt about themselves, they were as good as dead. That's the thing, right, when you're in the hands of a God of judgment and mercy, how you feel about yourself may not be how God sees you.

They felt good about themselves because they had their Sundays down (well, Saturdays, but the point stands). The liturgical services flowed on without a hitch. They had spent years perfecting the art of worship. They made all the sacrifices, said all the prayers, sang all the verses, wore all the robes . . . only to learn here that none of it mattered.

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices . . . your burnt offerings, your fatted beasts, the blood of bulls, lambs, goats. Bring before me no more vain offerings: your incense, your festivals, your convocations. I cannot endure them any longer. They've become a burden to me. I'm weary of them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you. No matter how many prayers you make, I'm not listening. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean.

This is utterly shocking, though it shouldn't have been. They'd just forgotten, as God's people do from time to time, that God is not just satisfied with the gilded crumbs of our spiritual intentions, but wants a complete fusion of our love of God and love of neighbor. This is life, this is fruit. And without it, worship is just a clanging gong in God's ears.

To a people who spent a lot of energy on their liturgical celebrations and for whom the sacrificial system at the temple earned God's pleasure, how can this be? And then they learn. It's not about perfecting their liturgies or coming with multitudes of sacrifices. It's not about the volume of their praise songs or the reverence of their festivals. Those worshipping acts can give glory to God; they can create space for people to encounter the living God. The centrality of worship for a worshipping people is woven deeply into the life of Israel and the church. But there comes a time, and it came in Isaiah 1, when what's happening outside the sanctuary is so foul, so polluted, so . . . wrong, that nothing that happens inside the sanctuary matters at all. In fact, what's outside the sanctuary is so bad that the more you do inside the sanctuary makes it even worse.

Your sins are scarlet; they are crimson. The blood on your hands isn't from the sacrificed animal you offered on the altar of God, but that is the blood of your neighbor whose life you place on the altar of your own greed and selfishness. Come let us reason this out. What shall we do about this?

When I read this passage years ago about snow-white grace covering my scarlet sins, I only was reading about what God alone can do for me. I can't manufacture grace. Grace is a gift from God that I need. But what I missed in not reading the rest of all of this is how God's grace isn't just for me for life hereafter but is supposed to flow through me for life here and now. This is the call of the scripture from end to end, the Torah, the prophets, the Gospels, the Epistles. All of it. The Gospel isn't just about passively accepting what God alone can do for us; it's accepting what God can do in and through those whose hearts belong to God.

This message is all through Isaiah. Isaiah is, "a vision of God and ourselves unequalled in its scope, clarity, and depth. Probably no other book of the bible," says Ellen Davis, "offers such vivid images of the divine: God high and lifted up as sovereign and judge over our sin-wrecked world; God as Immanuel, a sure and felt presence with us; God struggling like a woman in labor to bring forth new life in situations that seem, to ordinary eyes, entirely hopeless."

And into one of those situations, the words, "Cease to do evil; learn to do good. Easier said than done, but more important to do than say.

As central as worship is for God's people, just as central is how God's people live outside the sanctuary and away from the gathered assembly. Correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. All through the scripture in various combinations are the same concerns of God: for the poor, the sojourner in the land, the orphan, and the widow. In other words, those who are in the most vulnerable situations. God clearly, has a special compassion for and identification with the most vulnerable in the community and us when we are at our most vulnerable. God judges nations, societies, and congregations on how those folks are doing. It's only when we see all of that, as Isaiah shows us, that Jesus' whole way of life and his death begin to make sense. God's compassion and identification with the vulnerable in the community takes flesh in the life of Jesus whose heart embodies God's grace for us and whose body is broken for the life of the world.

And it is in his name that we come, and we worship. It is in his name that we are invited to the table of the bounteous feast. And it is in his name and in his power that we then are sent-- always sent into a world desperately hungry for the transformative grace of God.

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